

# CONNECTING WITH CITIZEN JOURNALISTS. AN EXPLORATORY LIVING LAB STUDY ON MOTIVATIONS FOR USING MOBILE REPORTING APPLICATIONS

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## Abstract

In the context of user generated content in the newsroom, mobile reporting applications are seen as a facilitator of citizen journalism, bringing news items from the user to the newsroom and vice versa. In this paper, we describe a Living Lab project aimed at developing a mobile reporting application for a regional television broadcaster that struggles reaching a young audience. Data were collected through an online survey (n:500), one focus group (n:9), a field trial (n:35) and in-depth interviews (n:10). Besides user motivations for using mobile reporting applications, we provide three user profiles and give insights in citizen journalism projects. A mobile reporting application could provide a solution for regional news stations to reach more youngsters, however, reasonable efforts should be taken to make such a project succeed.

**Index terms:** Citizen journalism, mobile reporting applications, living lab, online survey, focus group, field trial, in-depth interview

## 1. Introduction

During the past decade, the usefulness of User Generated Content (UGC) in the newsroom has been frequently debated, both from the users' and the news providers' point of view. On the one hand, the adoption of UGC in the newsroom is hindered by several contextual factors on different levels of the newsroom organization (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008). On the other hand, UGC has the potential to contribute to the daily journalistic practices, often as a traffic builder or as a supplemental source of information (Singer, 2010). Moreover, implementing UGC can also be a strategy to target new audiences (Livingstone, 2004). Nevertheless, 'citizen journalism' projects need to have a user-centric development process, for without an engaged audience the project will not harness this potential. Therefore, profound insights into the motivations to create and share user generated news is essential.

This paper aims to explore user motivations (in terms of why and how) for using mobile reporting applications. However, before elaborating on the users' attitudes, we must first provide a better understanding of citizen journalism and mobile reporting applications.

### Citizen journalism and mobile reporting applications

Often referred to as open source journalism, distributed journalism, public journalism, participatory journalism, democratic journalism, guerrilla journalism, street journalism, user-generated content and grassroots journalism, citizen journalism has found its beginning with

the emergence of the Internet and the rise of blogs, podcasts, streaming videos and other Web-related innovations (Rogers, 2008; Mapsofworld, 2014).

The concept of citizen journalism is based upon public citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Radsch (2013) defines citizen journalism as “an alternative and activist form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a repose to shortcoming in the professional journalistic field, that uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and ideals and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than traditional or mainstream journalism”.

In this context, mobile reporting applications have become a facilitator of citizen journalism. Mobile reporting applications mostly have two functions. On the one hand, they enable users to share news items in the form of pictures, movies or audio fragments captured with their smartphone, often accompanied with a short interpretation of the content. On the other hand, they enable users to consume news, adjusted to their preferences. Examples of these mobile reporting applications are CNN’s iReport, hereME!, new360 and Meporter.

All these applications have their differences and similarities, making them all unique in a sense. One application however, Meporter, stands out here. Meporter is offering real rewards and possibly even payments to the users who create content. More interesting, it faces similar challenges as other apps that depend on a network of users to create and view content: demonstrating its usefulness and attaining a critical mass of users (Sonderman, 2011).

The study presented in this paper focusses on a mobile reporting application developed for a regional television broadcaster. What differentiates this mobile reporting application from other applications enumerated previously in this paper is the fact that it focusses on the gathering and consummation of hyper local news. More specific, it only focusses on news items that occur in the region around Ghent, Belgium. Besides the fact that it is a facilitator for gathering local news content, the main reason for developing such an application is because they want to (re)connect with a (lost) target audience, namely, youngsters between 15 and 29 years old. Therefore, the application can be seen as a facilitator for attracting new viewers.

The further course of this paper is structured as follows: In section 2, the methodology of the Living Lab project is discussed, in section 3, results are provided and in section 4 and 5, a discussion and a brief conclusion of the paper are presented.

## **2. Methodology**

The study is conducted within a Living Lab project aimed at developing a citizen journalism application for a regional television broadcaster. Data were collected through an online survey (n:500), one focus group (n:9), a field trial (n:35) and in-depth interviews (n:10). The studied population included inhabitants of the Ghent region between 15 and 29 years old. Based on the results of the online survey and the focus group, a prototype was developed and a field trial was set up. During a two week period, 10 out of 35 test users were invited for an in-depth interview. The results of the online survey, focus group and the outcomes of the field trial and in-depth interviews are discussed below.

### **3. Results**

#### **Online survey (n:500)**

Youngsters' media usage has changed fundamentally over the past years. 58% of youngsters (aged between 15 and 29 years old) have a smartphone. Moreover, 95% of them has an account on the social network site Facebook. Also, 95% of them shares photos on Facebook on a regular basis.

We also noticed a shift regarding the consumption of news. Social network sites are the most popular websites (with 46% of respondents reporting daily use). Although 76% of respondents are interested in regional news, television broadcasted regional news only reaches 5% of the target audience on a daily basis, making it the second least popular source of news. Newspapers and magazines (72%) and Facebook (66%) are the most popular channels to consume regional news.

This situation poses a challenge for regional news channels and calls for innovative solutions to address this problem. The four major opportunities are (1) Customized news: youngsters can identify themselves less and less with a single selection of news items, there should be attention for niches, preferences,... (2) Content: youngsters are not appealed to the messages that regional news channels bring. (3) Participation: youngsters want to interact with each other and with the news when it is about regional news items (submitting, debating, annotating, sharing, ...). (4) Cross-media: television has lost its monopoly on the distribution of regional television news. The consulted channels are diverse, mainly social media play an increasingly important role in regional news consumption among young people.

Part of the solution is sought in the development of a mobile application for the collection and sharing of regional news. The five main advantages of such a mobile reporting application are (1) the speed at which news can be shared (and made public), (2) a richer range of audiovisual news footage, (3) reduced costs for the broadcaster, (4) the Long tail of news (in a traditional news organization a limited number of journalists provides a limited number of news. This platform allows to activate a large pool of citizen journalists who can deliver a wide range of news) and (5) participation (by bringing news closer to young people and allowing them to participate in the news, the relationship between regional television and young people can be strengthened).

However, significant challenges are linked with this such as embedding the new flow of news gathering in the editorial structure, moderation and gatekeeping of this news flow and quality monitoring (in terms of objectivity but also technically).

#### **Focus group (n:9)**

These findings were taken to the creation phase, a focus group in which we have been thinking together with 9 potential end-users about the concrete development of an application that meets these opportunities. In this phase, paper mock-ups of the application were made (see Figure 1). This allowed us to expose some important insights and users' needs.

A mobile reporting application should consist of two dimensions. These two goals must be clearly separated from each other to avoid confusion and to preserve the application's simplicity. (1) An app for citizen journalism with a focus on capturing and uploading news to the editor (delivery of photos, videos and news facts). Decent moderation and editing is

important here. (2) An app as a news source where the focus should lie on a timeline with the latest news and a live stream of the regional television. It is important to be able to set some filters so news can be tailored to the user.

The participants perceive such projects mainly positive because in this way the multitude of media, created by the citizens, can be used in a constructive way to enrich regional television news. Moreover, several sources and viewpoints provide an objective picture of news. Also, such initiatives have the potential to improve the youngsters' image of regional television.

However, there are some critical notes here. From a social point of view, the app should not lead to disaster entertainment. Such a project should never encourage people taking pictures of a burning car wreck rather than helping the victims or calling emergency services. In terms of content, there is a fear that the entries will not be objective, that the concept of news is hard to determine, that there will be submitted a lot of useless material and that such projects are only good for facts and images, but not for profundity and analysis. For example, five kids making an enormous snowman can be a news item to them, but not all television viewers will see this as a news item. On the technical side, bad network conditions can form a barrier but also poor image quality, image compression and audio can cause problems.

It is also important that such projects not only use citizen journalists for the delivery of news but there should certainly be enough attention for feedback, appreciation, support, community, reward,...

Regarding the role of the journalist in this narrative, the substantive work of the professional journalist is still considered to be at a higher level than that of citizen journalists. The youngsters consider journalists as the main guardians of quality, objectivity, profundity and critical analyzes. Moreover, they are important selection agents in a world where there is an information overload. Where citizen journalists can contribute mainly regarding hard news (facts), the classic journalist has the task to generate soft news (reports, connecting facts, interpretation,...). Citizen journalism is therefore primarily considered as an additional resource for journalists, similar to classical witnesses or news hotlines (e.g. web site, e-mail).

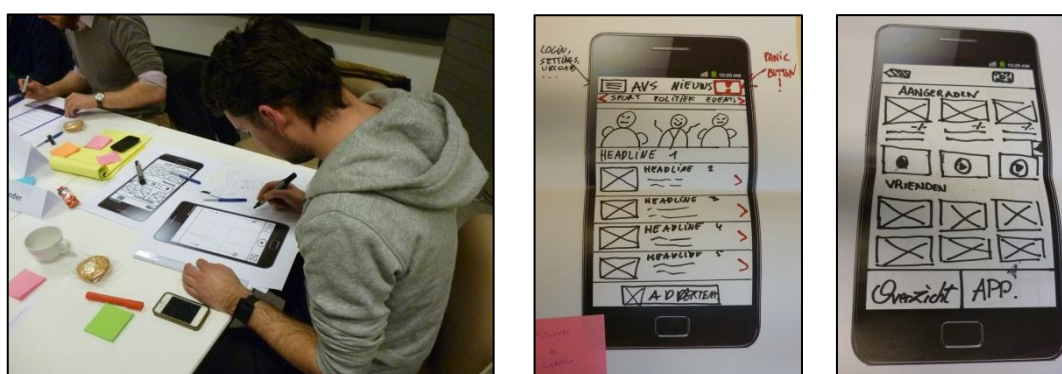


Figure 1. Paper mock-ups of the mobile reporting application made during the focus group

### Field trial (n:35) and in-depth interviews (n:10)

Based on these findings and the paper mock-ups, a prototype application was developed. This prototype was then subjected to a field trial in which we obtained both technical and subjective insights on the mobile reporting application. In this field trial, 35 participants were asked to download the mobile reporting application, make a news item and submit it to the

regional news station. Afterwards, an evaluation of the application was done. 10 participants were invited to an in-depth interview focusing on user motivations for and attitudes towards such applications.

The four main conclusions from the field trial were: (1) Regional news broadcaster only offering an application is insufficient. Users need a community and feedback. (2) The app must be integrated sufficiently in a broader social media strategy. In other words, the innovation must be supported by every stakeholder of the regional news station. (3) There must be invested in a platform, in an embedding in the editorial structure of the regional news broadcaster and in interaction between the broadcaster and the youngster. (4) Young people want to know what will happen to the content they deliver through the mobile reporting application. Additionally, an incentive policy can be set up to motivate users submitting news items repeatedly.

Prevalent user motivations for sharing news are 'creating awareness', 'identity construction', 'social interaction' and 'leisure'. Common drivers for creating news items are 'expressing creativity', 'entertainment' and 'improving skills'. A dichotomy exists between two types of users: the ones who think that content delivery should be anonymous (lower barrier) and the ones who think that citizen journalists should always be identified (quality assurance) and mentioned (social reward).

As for the attitude of the youngsters towards the regional news station, they were rather skeptical. They almost never watch it and they refer to the news station as a TV channel for old people. However, the participants indicated that such a project could change this because it is an innovative way to attract new (and younger) audiences and it creates brand awareness. Especially if the application were imbedded in a social media campaign and if special attention was given to user feedback and community. Some participants said that they would definitely watch more to the news station if they broadcasted their (peers') submitted news items.

The field trial and in-depth interviews also revealed three types of contributors: (1) 'Gold diggers' expecting a financial reward for the submitted content although they wish to stay anonymous. (2) 'Wannabe stars' approaching the application as a road to stardom. These users find non-monetary personal motivations, e.g. having your name published with your photos, more important than financial rewards. (3) 'True journalists' who strongly believe in the civic responsibility of reporting news to the world. They are most likely to use this application as an alternative tool to contribute to the journalistic service. For the latter, motivations for using a mobile reporting application are mostly intrinsic. In contrast to the first two types of contributors who are mostly extrinsically motivated. A solid understanding of these motivational constructs should be taken into account when developing or fine-tuning citizen journalism projects, targeting each profile in a specific way.

## **4. Discussion**

We must underline that the study presented in this paper is an exploratory study with the aim to investigate the concept and the adoption potential of such an application and the subsequent implications for the regional news station. The idea of attracting youngsters to a news station through the development of a mobile reporting application is merely one of several options to succeed.

Since it is a Living Lab study, we emphasize the importance of iterating the application. This way, we can eliminate barriers to adoption and facilitate user adoption. In this case, the prototype of the mobile reporting application must now be fine-tuned to a fully operational application. Preferably, a user study is conducted on the latter and again adjusted to the users' needs if necessary.

Currently, the prototype of the mobile reporting application investigated in this paper faces the same problem as the Meporter application. It fails to reach a critical mass of users because it cannot demonstrate its usefulness (yet). A reason for this is that the innovation is not supported by all people in the broadcasting company, hindering marketing and communication about the application to the outside world. However, the integration of the innovation throughout the whole company structure, i.e. making everyone support the application, must create a basis for carrying out the innovation and causing widespread diffusion of the application over the whole Ghent region.

## **5. Conclusion**

During the last decade, user generated content has become popular input in the newsroom. In this context, mobile reporting applications are seen as a facilitator of citizen journalism, bringing news items from the user to the newsroom and vice versa. In this exploratory living lab study, we describe the case of a regional news station that struggles reaching youngsters. A mobile reporting application could provide a solution to this situation.

In the online survey, we saw that there is an interest in local news amongst youngsters, but we also observed that the television is not the most popular channel to consume this media. This situation poses a challenge for regional news stations and calls for innovative solutions to address this problem. The development of a mobile reporting application is seen as a means to attract youngsters to the news station. Therefore, in a focus group, the outlines of the application were discussed. Such an application should have two dimensions: the user should be able to send news items and he should be able to receive news items. Based on these outlines, a prototype of the application was developed and tested in a field trial and additional in-depth interviews. This enabled us to gain insights on both the technical and subjective (user perspectives) level of the application. Youngsters' most prevalent user motivations are expressing creativity, identity construction, social interaction, leisure and improving personal skills. Based on these motivations, we can distinguish three user profiles that can be targeted each in a specific way. In order to reach new (younger) audiences by means of the application, special attention should be given to feedback, support and community building.

Finally, to make the application a successful project, the prototype of the mobile reporting application must be fine-tuned (iteratively) to a fully operational application and the innovation must be supported throughout the whole company fostering widespread diffusion.

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